



Difference worth tasting

Sainsbury's has an abundance of well-priced pleasures in store

Too often lately I've missed Sainsbury's twice-yearly wine showcases for the press, but happily I've now made amends. And there were lots of good things at the May session – simplicity, for a start.

Sainsbury's deserves a big, shiny gold star for its new wine pricing policy: just about every bottle is priced in round pounds, or in steps of 25p or 50p. Gone are those stupid 99p prices (marketing gurus argue that consumers do fall for the ploy, but surely the majority of us are more alert, as Sainsbury's thankfully acknowledges).

What of the wines sold at those transparent prices? I found much to enjoy, even at £6.50 or below. If you're looking for bottles for a summer picnic, beach party or barbecue, here are some suggestions: floral, stone-fruity, herbal and characterful Fiano IGT del Salento 2013, £5.25; aromatic, crisp Côtes de Gascogne 2013, £6; sweetly grapey sparkling Moscato, £6.50; juicy-fruited Portuguese Red, £5; soft but tangy rather than jammy Merlot Languedoc IGP 2013, £6; brambly-perfumed, ripe and well-balanced Pasico Old Vine Monastrell Shiraz 2013, £6. All but the last are from the Winemakers' Selection by Sainsbury's list.

I do wonder, though, whether wines at these prices give a fair return to their makers – a concern which one of Sainsbury's wine team with particular involvement in own brands was at pains to answer, suggesting that one useful consideration was that wine profit margins are a lot lower than those in other grocery categories.



■ The Lieubeau family: a good relationship with Sainsbury's

I hope he's right – and I do know one grower who has been a happy supplier for almost 20 years, though his wine sells at the slightly higher price point of £7. It's the crisp, pure and pleasantly fruited Taste the Difference Muscadet de Sèvre et Maine Sur Lie 2013, one of plenty of very good wines – whites especially – in this slightly more upmarket own-brand range.

François Lieubeau, who with his father Pierre makes the wine from the fruit of the family vineyards in some of the best muscadet territory, acknowledges that there are hard negotiations on both sides – that's business, after all. "We have a good relationship; we try to make it work from both sides."

Excellent value

Here are some other Taste the Difference wines I particularly like: tasty, zingy Touraine Sauvignon Blanc 2013, £8.50; long, enjoyable Sancerre 2013, £12.75, where fruit and minerality merge seamlessly; multilayered, elegantly crisp Pouilly-Fumé 2013, £12; perfumed, mineral, chewy-textured Languedoc White 2013 – different and very smart, excellent value at £8 (the Languedoc Red, same price, is good too, if less exciting); stony-scented, long, with fresh

fruit lightly rounded with a tiny touch of sweetness Awatere Valley Riesling 2013, £8.50. Completing a Kiwi trio are two 2013 Marlborough sauvignon blancs which make a fascinating comparison. While both are in an elegant, European-influenced style, Coolwater Bay, £9.50 (£7 until June 10), is softer and rounder, with Riverblock, £11, more mineral, citrusy and splendidly long.

There are other well-priced pleasures that don't carry Sainsbury's branding. Closières Picpoul de Pinet 2013, £8, is a prettily aromatic take on an essential summer white, with seafood-friendly freshness and appetising finish, and Château le Bernet Graves Blanc 2013, £9, is a stylish, appealing classic. Xanadu Next of Kin Cabernet Sauvignon 2011, £8.50, has tempting pure fruit behind its cassis nose, a touch of spice and leather – an Oz red with delicacy as well as character.

A final treat is a champagne I love but rarely encounter: Piper Heidsieck Rosé Sauvage, £35, deep bronze pink, dry and yeasty with intensely flavoured red fruit character and something almost savoury. It's in bigger stores only (including O2), but well worth seeking out for a special occasion.

Happily replete with roast beef of old England

Although the veal was vile and the lamb too chewy, pub's Sunday lunch still ranks highly

Restaurants, in common with any other discipline involving a lot of money, are constantly prey to the shifting of fashion. And at the moment, I detect a pulling in two very different directions: the return to traditional English ... together with the lure of the weird, not to say actively disgusting. By which I mean bugs. Insects. The things you are used to spraying and swatting and calling the council about are soon to be served on a plate near you. Now while it is true that up to two billion people eat insects as a matter of course (the entrée, probably) this is because in their part of the world there is very little alternative. In the West, however, we are up to our snouts in wonderful food ... so why? Well fashion, you see. There

is a restaurant in Nice which is miffed to have recently lost its Michelin star due to having served "crickets in a whisky bubble with French toast and pears". Noma – the hugely lauded Copenhagen restaurant famous for foraging from the countryside the sort of mulchy debris we are more accustomed to scraping off the soles of our wellingtons – serves butter enhanced by squashed wood ants. Well yum. There is in Holland a farm called Eat Grub (geddit?) which will deliver, to anyone sufficiently deranged to order it, a variety of mealworms, crickets and grasshoppers. And now let me tell you about Wang Fuming: this is not the state you are reduced to when, having anticipated lunch, you are served a bowlful of beetles. No, it is the name of the leading cockroach farmer in northern China. The

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Joseph Connolly at The Truscott Arms



■ Joseph at The Truscott Arms in Maida Vale

trick, he says, is to twice fry them in a wok of smoking oil. "This," he explains, "makes the shell crispy and the inside succulent" – these insides, I am informed, resembling cottage cheese and possessing all the flavour of earth, with a top note of ammonia.

Traditional

Well chacun à son goût, obviously – but I am assuming that your goût lies elsewhere, and so you may be relieved to hear that this review is concerned with the alternative direction: traditional English – and what more traditional than the Sunday roast? Everywhere, but everywhere, is serving this: it is difficult on a Sunday to order anything else. Quality and prices

vary wildly: there are pubs which offer the whole shebang including a drink for £7.95 ... but do beware. The grand hotels will do you proud (especially the Dorchester Grill and the Goring) but here, £7.95 will be rather less than half the discretionary service charge. Happily, there are very many in between – and the other Sunday, my wife and I sallied forth to the Truscott Arms in Maida Vale, which recently has been making something of a name for itself. The bright corner site used to be a very ordinary boozier, but now – under independent ownership – it has been (I quote) "restored to former glory, but" (I further quote) "with a modern twist". Which is enough to strike fear in the heart, of course:

steer well clear of the "modern twist", I say – unless we are fondly remembering Chubby Checker.

What it comes down to is a grey exterior. Well of course. And a grey interior. Well of course. In the first floor dining room there is a magnificent ceiling with scumbled and fantastically elaborate cornicing and roses ... from which dangle wacky pendants on bare grey flexes. Underneath one of which we took our place at a polished table set with proper napkins and good glassware, the chairs being curvy Thonet bentwood of the style most favoured by Le Corbusier – though these have seats upholstered in the lilac tartan of no known clan. The menu is the sort of thing an

expatriate would willingly die for – and talking of expats, do you know what English goodies they most eagerly crave, while exiled? Here is the list: Heinz baked beans, Cadbury's Creme Eggs, PG Tips, Bisto, Branston pickle, Marmite, Mr Kipling cakes and Paxo stuffing. Not to mention Warburton's crumpets. And I can't quite bring myself to write "Love Hearts" – but there, I've done it now. All of which proves that the taste of expats is so woefully low that frankly all they deserve is abroad.

It's an easygoing restaurant, and I suspect particularly on Sundays: pushchairs were all over the place, and that was a worry: an unexploded time bomb in the room ... but all the ickle kiddies turned out to be surprisingly well behaved, so that was all right then. The place is noted for its microbrewery ales, and several tables bore pints of those. Mine didn't: mine had a bottle of 2008 Chateau Cissac – a perfectly sublime and underrated Haut-Medoc cru bourgeois that is more like a very special Pauillac. A really good list, heavy on French – though not omitting a clutch of Australians with these damned "funny" names that I am getting mighty sick of: Mullygrubber, The Pugilist, Mad Fish, Battle of Bosworth ... oh dear oh dear ...

Scarlet smear

My wife was starting with a salad of candy and golden beetroot with honey and balsamic. This was prettily presented across a viscous scarlet smear that spoke of a recent jugular eruption. "Beautifully fresh," she said, "and a true appetiser." I had a risky veal tartare: the risk, it didn't come off. The meat was not chopped finely enough, was too cold, and harboured horrible gristly bits: not at all nice, and barely touched. The teeny mushrooms, parmesan and anchovy emulsion were very good, though. The waiter asked how it was, and I told him: he apologised, and said he would tell chef (who, presumably, already knew).

And now to the meat and potatoes of the thing: three roasts were on offer at £18 a whack: 35-

day aged beef rump with Yorkshire pudding and onion gravy, pork, and smoked lamb shoulder with braised leg with garlic, rosemary and "lamb sauce". I had the beef, my wife had the lamb – both of which came with roast potatoes, honey roast vegetables and green beans. The bottle and glasses had to be shifted when the food came: a vast plank with the generous carved meat, dinky saucepans of veg, big puffy puddings and the most enticing roasts. The beef was silky and luscious, the potatoes as crunchy as they looked: perfect, actually. Gravy too: spot-on. Problems with the lamb, though – seemingly cross-cut and sinewy: shoulder isn't a great cut unless slow cooked. The braised leg was marvellous, however: could have done with more of that – no hint of smokiness, though. My wife rounded off with rhubarb crumble and ginger ice cream: practically liquid rhubarb covered in vanilla custard, this topped with muesli – not a traditional crumble. "It's all right," she said, "but there's no splooginess to it" (please excuse technical terminology). The abandoned veal tartare appeared on the bill, very disappointingly – but a good lunch, and we were crammed. Later in the day, all we had space for was a Warburton's crumpet stuffed with twice fried cockroaches, and topped with a Love Heart.

■ Joseph Connolly's new novel, *Boys and Girls*, is published by Quercus (£18.99). All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.

FACTFILE

- THE TRUSCOTT ARMS
55 Shirland Road, W9
Tel: 020 7266 9198
- Open Monday-Thursday 10am-11.30pm, Friday-Saturday 10am-12pm, Sunday 10am – 10.30pm.
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆
- The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆☆
- Cost: About £110 for three-course meal for two with wine.

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